



IN THE FIELD



A green truck pulls around the Utah campground loop, pausing by a cluster of dumpsters, where a man in uniform hops out to remove the trash and tidy the area. A five-year-old boy stands at his father's side, watching the scene with curiosity. His dad points to the man in uniform.

"You always wave and thank those people," he tells his young son. "They're the ones who take care of the woods for everyone."

Fast forward a few decades and Melvin Durrant is fulfilling the goal of his five-year-old self: to work for the Forest Service. Durrant, wildland fire operations specialist for the Deschutes National Forest, is going on 18 years with the agency.

Durrant came to the Forest Service while studying forestry at Utah State University. After completing a seven week summer program designed to teach Forest Service survey methods, he took a seasonal position

on the Ochoco National Forest in reforestation. After two seasons in reforestation, he realized that he was working in a fire dependent ecosystem, inspiring him to try his hand at wildland firefighting.

Initially working on an engine crew on the Ochoco's Rager Ranger District, Durrant then made the move to Prineville Bureau of Land Management fire management program for a couple of seasons. Durrant came to the Deschutes National Forest in 2003 as a hand crew leader. In 2006, he took a detail into his current position, which he was officially hired into in 2008.

For Durrant, a normal day in his current position varies with the seasons. His routine in the midst of fire season begins by

getting to work half an hour before everyone else to give himself time to prepare for briefing—gathering the fire weather forecast, the day's "Six Minutes for Safety," and the national fire situation report. He then conducts a briefing to all resources on hand, doling out work assignments for the day, such as checking reports of new fire starts, monitoring old incidents or patrolling. Durrant spends the rest of his day supporting his fire staff, either by moving around resources, or ordering additional help. As with most people who work for the Forest Service though, he still relishes his time in the field.

"One of the best parts of the job is getting out of the office and actually fighting fire," explains Durrant, a wide grin revealing the passion driving most people in the fire service career. "That's the great thing about most of the positions in the Forest Service—being able to get out into the woods."



Melvin Durrant

Wildland Fire Operations Specialist

DESCHUTES
National
Forest



Another part of his job that Durrant loves involves his role as a training officer. He enjoys helping to introduce new employees into the system and pass down his knowledge and experiences to prepare them for a career in fire. He stresses the importance of professionalism and even today, relies on leadership skills he learned from people above him with many more years with the agency.

For people looking to follow a similar career path as his, Durrant adamantly believes that people must be willing to work hard to get to where they want. He says fire isn't the business for making friends, but rather people need to be there to get the job done. A career in fire emphasizes team work, trust and respect for the duties at hand. While a formal education isn't necessary, a solid understanding of the outdoors is crucial—understanding ecology, weather, fuels, topography, and how these elements relate to fire.

Durrant also stresses, that it's a popular misconception that wildland firefighting is the career for people in it for the money. While you'll make a living wage, the real rewards aren't monetary. The ultimate payout comes from being in the forest, watching landscapes evolve and putting out fires—it's all a very tangible process.

"It's really cool to be able to see the changes that we make, even if it's on a small scale," imparts Durrant. "We'll thin a unit one season, burn it the next, and then you get to watch its health restored over the next 10 to 15 years."

All projects, most of them fires, weigh equally important for Durrant—except for that one four-acre fire where he proposed to his wife. Durrant takes great pride in all of his work, including the Scott Street compound, out of where his fire resources are based. He and his staff take ownership of the place, ensuring that repairs and upkeep are maintained. Durrant is also responsible for spearheading the implementation of a security system around the complex. For Durrant, all aspects of the job deserve equal dedication and effort.

"Working for the Forest Service means serving the people and serving the land," emphasizes Durrant. "It's more than just a job that I show up to every day. We're making a difference on the ground, taking care of something that everyone will use."

FIRE LINE PROPOSAL

Unique proposals have always been a trend, but not many people can say they were proposed to while working on a forest fire—unless, of course, you're Maureen Durrant. Both Melvin and Maureen responded to a four-acre fire on the Crescent Ranger District. Melvin had been hoping to pop the question soon, and knew he wanted it to happen on a fire.

That day, as he worked around the perimeter of the fire line falling hazard trees, his boss walked by and suggested it was time. As resources wrapped up the fire, everyone came together for a briefing.

"It definitely took me by surprise," remembers Maureen. "I thought I had forgotten my hard hat or some other form of PPE and was in trouble when he called me over in front of the whole group during [the] briefing. There are many memorable days of work from when I worked in fire, but that was one I won't forget."